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TECHIE, TREE-LOVER FROM TIMBAKTU

By Ajit Ranade, Mumbai Mirror | Updated: May 27, 2017, 07.11 AM IST

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Dr U Subbaraju was known for his endeavour to educate underprivileged children, and his love for trees.

About half a century ago, a British economist E. F. Schumacher wrote a book called Small is Beautiful. The sub-title was - A Study of Economics As if People Mattered. The book questioned the wisdom of pursuing high economic growth for its own sake. If it leads to depletion of natural resources, polluted water and air, how can it lead to a better standard of living? If higher GDP entails more expenditure on police and security is that a sign of improved quality of life? Schumacher was echoing earlier visionaries like Gandhi and Thoreau. Gandhi famously said

that the world has enough for everybody's need, but not for everybody's greed.

A person who actually lived these principles in his own quiet life, who always carried a gentle smile and a helping hand, passed away earlier this month. He was snatched away far too soon, for he was just 50 years old.

Dr U Subbaraju (Subba to his friends) was born in a small farming labourer family in Andhra Pradesh. His father was a gang coolie in Tirumala ghat. Since his father passed away when he was just five, his mother put him in the Navodaya residence school run by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam.

Despite his near penniless childhood, Subba fought all odds, and got into IIT Madras where he received a B.Tech in Civil Engineering. He wanted to work in the development field, so he wrote to a Professor at the Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Area at IIT Bombay. The Prof said, come to IITB.

Subba came by qualifying through the national entrance exam, got an M.Tech and then a PhD from the Energy Systems Engineering department. He got the best PhD thesis award in 1996 and best alumnus award from his department in 2008.

Soon after his PhD, instead of going to America or some corporate gig, he went to work in Timbaktu Collective in Anantapur district of Andhra. It was always his passion to work in the area of rural development. He founded and

spearheaded the education initiative of Timbaktu, setting up a school for children abandoned by their families.

Subba lived and taught there, and his own children too were part of that school. The most abiding impression of any visitor to the school was how happy all the children were. His approach to teaching was holistic and experiential. Renowned educators who visited, said that the workshops at Subba's school were perhaps the most innovative they had ever seen. Stacks of old newspapers to make paper caps. Old magazines for origami projects. Every bottle, old pen, cycle tube lovingly kept so that children could innovatively use and re-use them.



In 1995, Dr Subbaraju (L) joined the Timbaktu Collective, an NGO that works for rural education and development. (R) Students from Nature school in Anantpur where he taught

Visitors found Subba's house was as minimalist as the man himself. His life and work was a living example of Schumacher and Gandhi. Indeed he once sent postcards on Gandhi Jayanti to all his friends with the Gandhian slogan "Live simply, that others may simply live". (Was this Subba's creation?)

Even at IITB he touched the lives of many students, co-workers and staff. He was a lover of mother Earth and planted vegetables and fruit trees in vacant spaces around the hostel.

One of his more well-known initiative was to plant saplings on the barren hill behind hostel 3. After the rains, he rallied a volunteer force to take up water in buckets up the hill. He gifted Jean Giono's precious book *The Man Who Planted Trees* to hundreds of friends.

Later in life at Timbaktu he published a very popular children's magazine called Kothapalli in Telugu (<http://kottapall.in>).

He was a man with a quiet conviction, but wasn't a fanatic. His approach was scientific, humane and filled with empathy for the fellow human being.

He once described the difference between a farmer and an NGO. If an NGO wanted to start a poultry farm, it would procure a plot, a shed, hire workers, buy registers, weighing machines, maybe get a motorbike, and lastly get the chickens.

A farmer would buy a couple of chicks, feed them from his kitchen, grow the brood, build a fence with material lying around and figure out money for the coop. For the farmer the chicken always comes first. As his friends said, "Subba clearly understood life from first principles, ground upward".

Indeed his life was a continuous feedback from theory to practice and back, with great willingness to learn, but eagerness to do.

One friend describes Subba as someone who stands apart for his simplicity, honesty and most importantly love of children. This silent smiling worker's sudden passing away is a loss to the nation. At a time when we grapple with the tradeoffs of development and trees, the best tribute to Dr. Subbaraju would be to imbibe his insights in our daily lives.

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